

The Country of Braj.—By F. S. GROWSE, Esq., M. A., C. S.

Whatever the changes in the national religion, the city of Mathurá has continued from remotest antiquity the chosen centre of Hindú devotion. When Buddhism prevailed throughout India, the votaries of Sakya Muni were drawn from the far distant realm of China to visit its sacred shrines; and when the temples of Buddha were swept away by the torrent of Pauránik Brahmanism, the desecrated sites were speedily occupied by the new order of divinities. Though the city was plundered of all its accumulated wealth by the very first of the great Muhammadan invaders, the sacred edifices themselves survived, and for a period of 700 years continued to be enriched with successive donations, till Aurangzeb, the last and most fanatical of the Delhi emperors, razed every stone to the ground, built mosques with the materials, and abolished the very name of the city, changing it from Mathurá to Islámábád. But the humiliation was of short continuance; after the death of Aurangzeb and the virtual extinction of the empire, first ensued a period of anarchy in which neither Hindú nor Musalmán had the power to crush his neighbour, and then the tolerant sway of Great Britain, under which both are equally protected. Thus in the present day, after the lapse of a century and half from the period of its utter ruin, though the temples have lost the charm of antiquity, nor can boast the enormous wealth which they enjoyed in the days of the great Indo-Scythian sovereigns, Kanishka and Huvishka and their successors till the invasion of Mahmúd, yet the holy city has no lack of stately buildings, with which, as described of old in the Harivansa, it rises beautiful as the crescent moon over the dark stream of the Jamuná.*

No ancient authorities state in precise phrase the origin of the name 'Mathurá:' but as the district has always been celebrated for its wide extent of pasture land and many herds of cattle, it is more than probable that the word is connected with the Sanskrit root

* अर्द्धचन्द्रप्रतीकाशा यमुनातीरशोभिता. Harivansa, 3100.

math, 'to churn.'* In support of this theory, it may be observed that many places in the district unmistakeably derive their names from similar terms of rural life. For example, Gokul means originally 'a herd of kine;' Gobardhan, 'a rearer of kine;' and Baṭhan, the name of two extensive villages near the town of Kosi, 'a cattle-pen.' Thus too Mát, on the bank of the Jamuná opposite Brindában, is so called from *mát*, 'a milk pail;' and Dadhigánw, contracted into Dahgánw, in the Kosi Pargana, from *dadhi*, 'curds.' Native scholars would probably prefer to see in Mathurá an allusion to Madhu-mathan, a title of Krishna, implying the destroyer of Madhu, the demon on the site of whose stronghold the city was first founded, and from whom it is sometimes called Madhupúri; but this legend, there can be little doubt, is of later date than the local name.

According to Hindú topography, the town forms the centre of a circuit of 84 *kos*, called the circle of Braj or Braj-mandal. This word Braj also means in the first instance 'a herd;' the noun being derived from the root *vraj*, 'to go,' and acquiring its signification from the fact that cattle are always on the move and never can remain long on one pasture-ground. For a similar reason the pastoral tribe of Ahírs, originally abhírs, take their name from the root *ír*, 'to go,' with the prefix *abhi*, 'about.' Hence it arises that in the earliest authorities for Krishna's adventures both Vraja and Gokula are used to denote not the definite localities now bearing those names, but any chance spot temporarily used for stalling cattle: inattention to this archaism has led to some confusion in assigning sites to the various legends.

* Thus in all descriptions of the local scenery the churn forms a prominent feature, as for example in the Harivansa, 3395.

क्षेम्यं प्रचारबडलं हृष्टपुष्टजनाद्यतं ।
 दामनोप्रायबडलं गर्गरोद्गारनिखनं ॥
 तक्रनिखावबडलं दधिमण्डाद्रग्दत्तिकं ।
 मन्यानबलयोद्गारैर्गोपोनां जनितखनं ॥

"A fine country of many pasture lands and well nurtured people, full of ropes for tethering cattle, resonant with the voice of the sputtering churn, and abounding in oceans of curds; where the soil is ever moist with the froth of milk, and the stick with its circling cord sputters merrily in the milk pail, as the girls spin it round." And again in section 73 of the same poem ब्रजेषु च विशेषेण गर्गरोद्गारहासिषु, "in homesteads gladdened by the sputtering churn."

It is probable that if an accurate measurement were made, 84 *kos* would be found a very rough approximation, more or less, to the actual distance traversed by the pilgrims in performing the *Pari-krama*, or Perambulation of Braj. In ancient Indian territorial divisions, a *chaurási*, or group of 84 villages, occurs as frequently as a hundred in English counties. The same number, as has been most elaborately demonstrated by Sir Henry Elliot in his *Supplementary Glossary*, enters largely into every cycle of Hindú legend and cosmogony. There can be no doubt that it was originally selected for such general adoption as being the multiple of the number of months in the year with the number of days in the week. It is therefore peculiarly appropriate in connection with the Braj Mandál, if Krishna, in whose honour the perambulation is performed, be regarded as the Indian Apollo, or sun-god.

The first aspect of the country is a little disappointing to the student of Sanskrit literature, whom the glowing eulogiums of the poets have led to anticipate a second vale of Tempe. The soil, being poor and thin, is unfavourable to the growth of most large forest trees: the mango and *shisham*, the glory of the lower Duáb are conspicuously absent, their place being most inadequately supplied by the *ním*, *farás*, and various species of the fig tribe. For the same reason the dust in any ordinary weather is deep on all the thoroughfares, and if the slightest air is stirring, rises in a dense cloud and veils the whole landscape in an impenetrable haze. The *Jamuná*, the one great river of Braj, during eight months of the year meanders slowly a mere rivulet between wide expanses of sand, bounded by monotonous flats of arable land, or high banks cracked and broken by the rapidly expended force of contributory torrents into ugly chasms and stony ravines naked of all vegetation. As the limits of Braj from north to south on one side are defined by the high lands across the *Jamuná*, so are they on the other side by the hill range of *Bharatpúr*, but there are few peaks of conspicuous height and the general outline is tame and unimpressive. The villages, though large, are meanly built, and betray the untidiness characteristic of *Játs* and *Gújars*, the chief proprietary classes. From a distance they are often picturesque, being built on the slope of natural or artificial mounds, and thus gain

dignity by elevation. But on nearer approach they are found to consist of labyrinths of the narrowest lanes winding between the mud walls of large enclosures, which are rather cattle yards than houses. At the base of the hill is ordinarily a broad circle of waste land, studded with low trees and karíl bushes, which afford grateful shade and pasturage for the herds; while the large pond, from which the earth was dug to construct the village site, supplies them throughout the year with water. At sunrise and sunset the thoroughfares are all but impassable, as the straggling herds of oxen and buffaloes leave and return to the homestead; for in the straitened precincts of an ordinary village are stalled every night from 500 or 600 to 1000 head of cattle, at least equalling, often outnumbering, the human population. The general poverty of the district forms the motif of a popular Hindi couplet, in which Krishna's neglect to enrich the land of his birth with any choicer product than the karíl or wild caper is cited as an illustration of his wilfulness. The lines may be thus done into English:

Krishna, you see, will never lose his wayward whims and vapours;

For Kábul teems with luscious fruit, while Braj boasts only capers.

However, in the rains, at which season of the year all pilgrimages are made, the Jamuná is a mighty stream, a mile or more broad; its many contributory torrents and all the ponds and lakes with which the district abounds are filled to overflowing; the hill side is clothed with the foliage of the *dho* trees, the dusty plain is transformed into a green sward, and the smiling prospect goes far to justify the warmest panegyrics of the Hindu poets, whose appreciation of the scenery, it must be remembered, has been further intensified by religious enthusiasm. Even at all seasons of the year, the landscape has a quiet charm of its own; a sudden turn in the winding lane reveals a grassy knoll with stone-built well and overhanging pípal; or some sacred grove with dense thicket of prickly ber and weird pílo trees with clusters of tiny berries and strangely gnarled and twisted trunks, entangled in a creeping undergrowth of híns and chhonkar and karíl; and in the centre bordered with flowering oleander and niwára, a still, cool lake with modest shrine and well-fenced bush of tulsi on the raised terrace, from which a broad flight of steps, gift of some thankful pilgrim

from afar, leads down to the water's edge. The most pleasing architectural works in the district are the large masonry tanks; these are very numerous and all display excellent taste in design and skill in execution. The temples, though in some instances of considerable size, are all, excepting those in the three large towns, utterly devoid of artistic merit.

It is only in a very loose and ideal sense that Mathurá can be regarded as the centre of the circle; since it is but 10 miles distant from the most southern point, Baldeva, and some 30 from the northern extremity, Kotban. This fact gives colour to a theory, which Elliot mentions under the word 'chaurási,' and supports by reference to what he calls a trite Hindi couplet, that in earlier times the country of Braj was of much wider extent. The boundaries therein specified are Bar, Son, and the village of Súrasen, which latter is taken to mean Batesar* on the Jamuná below Agra, which is still a place of pilgrimage and scene of a large fair on the full moon of Kártik. But it is certain that all the recognized sacred sites are included within the modern limits of the parikrama; and whatever may be the authority of the lines quoted, they are not familiar in the present day to any of the local pandits; nor can they be of any great antiquity, since they contain the Persian word '*hadd*.' In the Váráha Purána, the Mathurá-Mandal is described as 20 yojanas in extent. Taking the yojana as 7 miles, and the kos as $1\frac{3}{4}$ mile, 20 yojanas would be about equal to 84 kos. It is said that the greater perambulation is occasionally performed by the more devout and occupies a period of two months, while the smaller circuit is completed in half that time. But the fact in itself is questionable, and in any case it is only the shorter route, now to be described, which can claim attention as a popular devotion.

The perambulation commences in Bhádon (August—September,) on account of the anniversary of Krishna's birth being celebrated in that month. The number of sacred places, † woods, groves, ponds, wells, hills, and temples—all to be visited in fixed order is very considerable; but the 12 Bans or woods, and 24 groves or Upabans,

* It might mean the town of Mathurá itself, king Ugrasen being sometimes styled Súrasen.

† There are said to be 5 hills, 11 rocks, 4 lakes, 84 ponds, and 12 wells.

are the characteristic feature of the pilgrimage, which is thence popularly called the 'Ban-játra.' The numbers 12 and 24 have been arbitrarily selected on account of their mystic significance, and probably few Hindú ritualists, if asked off-hand to enumerate the 24 Upabans, would agree precisely in the specification. The following list is taken from a Hindí Directory for the use of pilgrims, which may be considered the standard authority on the subject, and is no doubt published *permissu superiorum*.

The 12 Bans : Madhu-ban ; Tálban ; Kumud-ban ; Bahulá-ban ; Kám-ban ; Khadira-ban ; Brindá-ban ; Bhadra-ban ; Bhandír-ban ; Bel-ban ; Loh-ban, and Mahá-ban.

The 24 Upabans : Gokul, Gobardhan, Barsána, Nandgánw, San-
ket, Parimadra, Aríng, Sessai, Mát, Unchagánw, Khel-ban, Srí-
kund,* Gandharv-ban, Parásoli, Bilchu, Bachh-ban, Adi-badri, Ka-
rahla, Ajnokh, Pisáyo, Kokila-ban, Dadhigánw, Kot-ban, and
Rával.†

This list bears internal evidence of antiquity in its want of close correspondence with existing facts ; since some of the places, though retaining their traditionaly repute, have now nothing that can be dignified with the name either of wood or grove, while others are known only by the villagers in the immediate neighbourhood and have been supplanted in popular estimation by rival sites of more easy access or greater natural attractions. Starting from Mathurá the pilgrims make their first halt at the village of Maholi, where they visit Madhu-ban, the fabled stronghold of the giant Madhu.‡ They then turn south to Tálban in the village of Társi, where Bala-rám vanquished the demon Dhenuk, and recovering the original line of march at Báti, pay their respects to Kumud-ban and Bahulá-ban.§ Next passing through the villages of Tosh, Jakhin-gánw, and Mukhrái, they arrive at Rádhá-kund with the two sacred pools

* Sríkund, *i. e.* Holy-well, is another name for Radha-kund.

† The twelve Bans are connected with Pauránik legends, and are all mentioned by name in the Mathurá Mahátmya. The 24 Upabans refer mainly to Rádhá's adventures, and have no ancient authority whatever. Gobardhan, the one exception, is as much a centre of sanctity as Mathurá itself, and though for the sake of uniformity it is now included in the list of Upabans, it is never strictly so regarded.

‡ Madhu-Sudán, *i. e.* the destroyer of Madhu, is one of Krishna's favorite titles : the reason is not very obvious, since all authorities agree that Madhu was dead some generations before Krishna took birth.

§ Báti would appear to be a contraction of Bahula-vati.

prepared for Krishna's expiatory ablution after he had slain the bull Arishta. At midnight, on the 8th day of the dark fortnight of the month Kartik, the spirits of all the holy places in India renew their visit to this auspicious spot; and every devout Hindú who at that particular time takes a plunge beneath the wave, is washed clean from every sin, and acquires the same amount of merit as if he had made a separate pilgrimage to each of the assembled divinities at his own special locality. The town which has arisen on the margin of these two famous lakes, is of considerable extent, and is crowded with religious edifices, the pious foundations of princes and pilgrims from the most remote parts of India. One temple in particular may be mentioned as erected by the Rájá of Manipúr, from the far east of Bengal. The two lakes are parted only by a broad stone terrace, and are both faced on all four sides with long, unbroken flights of steps of the same material. Ordinarily the water is so abundant that it washes nearly the highest tier, being supplied by the natural drainage of a wide extent of woodland, locally called 'the Ghaná;' and the charm of the broad and brimming basin is much enhanced by the unusual care that is taken to preserve it free from all pollution. Till the beginning of this century, the two reservoirs were simply as nature had designed them; the present stone gháts were completed in the year 1817, at the sole cost of Lálá Bábú, a native of Calcutta, but proprietor of large landed estates in the neighbourhood both of Mathurá and Anúpshahr. The whole quarter of the town in the immediate vicinity of the lakes is occupied exclusively by a colony of Bengalis.

On the borders of the parish of Rádhá-kund is Kusum-sarovar, or 'the flowery lake,' a magnificent sheet of water, 460 feet square, with broad flights of stone steps broken up on each side by projecting arcades of elegant design into one wide central and four smaller lateral gháts. A lofty terrace runs the whole length of the east side, having its front relieved with two-storied kiosques and alcoves of varied outline, and bears the stately tombs of Súraj-mal, the founder of the present Bharatpúr dynasty and his two queens, Hansiya* and Kishori. From this point rough fragments

* Hans-ganj, on the bank of the Jamuná immediately opposite Mathurá, was founded by this Ráuí; in consequence of a diversion of the road which once

of rock crop up above the surface of the soil, and form the beginning of the celebrated range of Gobardhan, Gíri-ráj or the Royal Hill, as it is generally styled. About the centre of the line stands the town of Gobardhan, clustering round a vast irregularly shaped tank, called the Mánasi Gangá. Here a great fair, known as the Dípdán, or 'Offering of Lamps,' is held every year on the festival of the Diválí, about the beginning of the cold season, and is frequently attended by as many as 100,000 visitors. On the bank stand two sumptuous monuments in memory of two of the late Rajas of Bharatpur; and from a rising ground opposite frowns the ancient temple of Haridèva, the most solemn and imposing, save one, of all the religious buildings in Upper India. The pilgrims visit in order all the sacred sites in the neighbourhood; the village of Basái, where the two divine children with their foster-parents once came and 'dwelt' (*basáe*); the grove of Aríng; Madhuri-kund; Morban, the haunt of the peacock, and Chandra-sarovar, *i. e.* the moon-lake, where Brahma joining with the Gopis in the mystic dance was so enraptured with delight, that all unconscious of the fleeting hours he allowed the single night to extend over a period of six months. After a visit to Paitho, where the people of Braj 'came in' (*paitha*) to take shelter from the storms of Indra under the uplifted range, they pass along the heights of Gobardhan to Anyor, 'the other end,' and so by many sacred rocks, as Sugandhi sila, Sindúri Sila and Sundar Sila with its temple of Gobardhan-náth, to Gopálpur, Bilchu, and Gántholi, where the marriage 'knot' (*gánth*) was tied that confirmed the union of Rádhá and Krishna. Then following the Bharatpúr frontier, they arrive at the famous Kámban, with the Luk-luk cave where the boys played blind-man's-buff, and Aghásur's cave where the demon of that name was destroyed, and leaving Kanwárogánw enter again upon British territory near the village of Unchágánw with its richly endowed temple of Baldeva. Close by is Barsána, where Rádhá was brought up by her parents Brikhbhán and Kírat, with Dohanikund near Chiksauli, where as Jasoda was cleansing her 'milk-pail' (*dohani*) she first saw the youthful pair together and vowed that one day

passed through it, it is now that most melancholy of all spectacles, a modern ruin.

they should be husband and wife ; Prem-sarovar, or Lovelake, where first the amorous tale was told, and Sánkari Khor, the narrow pass between the hills, where Krishna lay in ambush and levied his toll of milk on the Gopis as they came in from Gahvarban, 'the thick forest' beyond. Next are visited Sanket ; Rithora, home of Chandrávali, Radha's faithful attendant ; and Nand-gánw, long the abode of Nanda and Jasoda, with the great lake Pán-sarovar, at the foot of the hill, where Krishna morning and evening drove his foster-father's cattle to 'water' (*pán*). Next in order come the villages of Karahla ; Kamai,* where one of Rádhá's humble friends was honored by a visit from her lord and mistress in the course of their rambles ; Ajnokh,† where Krishna pencilled his lady's eyebrow with *anjan*, as she reclined in careless mood on the green sward ; and Pisáyo, where she found him fainting with 'thirst' (*piyás*)‡ and revived him with a draught of water. Then, still bearing due north, the pilgrims come to Khadira-ban in Khaira ; Kumar-ban and Jávak-ban in Jáo, where Krishna tinged his lady's feet with the red Jávak dye ; and Kokila-ban, ever musical with the voice of the cuckoo ; and so arrive at the foot of Charan Pahár in Little Baṭhan, where Indra descended from heaven on his elephant Airávati, and did homage to the lord of Braj, as to this day is attested by the prints of the divine feet (*charan*) impressed upon the rock. They then pass on through Dadhigánw, where Krishna stayed behind to divert himself with the village girls, having sent Baldeva on ahead with the cows to Baṭhan, and so reach Koṭban,§ the northernmost point of the perambulation.

The first village on the homeward route is Sessai (Sesha's couch), where Krishna revealed his divinity by assuming the emblems of Náráyan, and reclining under the canopying heads of the great serpent Sesha, into whose form Baldeva had transfigured himself ;

* This simple name 'Kamaí' is distorted on the Government map into the unpronounceable form Kowyeen ! Khayra also appears as Khaeruh.

† Ajnokh, or in its fuller form Ajnokhari, is a contraction for Anjan pokhari, the Anjan lake. So Kusum Sarovar is sometimes called Kusumokhar.

‡ The connection of Pisáyo with *piyás* is rather far-fetched. But most of the other derivations are equally unscientific. They are quoted not for their philological value, but as shewing how thoroughly the whole country side is impregnated with the legends of Krishna, where some allusion to him is detected in the name of every village.

§ As Tarsi derives its name from Tálban, so it would seem, the town of Kosi from Koṭban.

but the vision was all too high a mystery for the herdsmen's simple daughters, who begged the two boys to doff such fantastic guise and once more as they were wont join them in the sprightly dance. Then reaching the Jamuná at Khelban by Shergarh, where Krishna's temples were decked with the marriage wreath (*sehara*),* they follow the course of the river by Chír Ghát, where the frolicsome god stole the bathers' clothes, and arrive at Nandghát. Here Nanda bathing one night was carried off by the myrmidons of the sea-god Varuna, who had long been lying in wait for this very purpose, since their master knew that Krishna would at once follow to recover his foster-father, and thus the depths of ocean, too, no less than earth would be gladdened with the vision of the incarnate deity. The adjoining village of Bhaygánw† derives its name from the 'terror' (*bhay*) that ensued on the news of Nanda's disappearance. The pilgrims next pass through Bachhban, where the demon Bachhásur was slain; the two villages of Basái, where the Gopis were first 'subdued' (*basái*) by the power of love; Átas, Nari-Semri,‡ Satikra, and Akrúr, where Kansa's perfidious invitation to the contest of arms was received; and lastly Bhatronḍ,§ where one day when the two boys' stock of provisions had run short, some Brahman's wives supplied their wants; though the husbands, to whom application was first made, had churlishly refused; and so arrive at Brindában, where many a sacred ghát and venerable shrine claim devout attention.

The pilgrims then cross the river and visit the tangled thickets of Bel-ban|| in Jahángírpúr; the town of Mát with the adjoining woods of Bhandír-ban and Bhadra-ban, where the son of Rohini

* This is a curious specimen of perverted etymology illustrating the persistency with which Hindús and Muhammadans each go their own way, and ignore each other's existence. There can be no doubt that the town derives its name from a large fort, of which the ruins still remain, built by Sher Sháh, Emperor of Delhi from 1540 to 1545, A.D.

† This village is more ordinarily and perhaps more correctly written and pronounced Bhaugánw.

‡ A large fair called the Nau Durgá is held at the village of Nari Semri during the dark fortnight of Chait, the commencement of the Hindu year. The same festival is also celebrated at Sánchauli in the Kosi Parganah and at Nagar-koṭ in Gurgáon.

§ To commemorate this event, a fair called the Bhat-mela, is held at Bhatronḍ in the month of Kartik.

|| Balbhadra, 'the strong and good,' *ἄγιος ἰσχυρός*, is an alternative name for Balarám.

first received his distinctive title of Balaráma, *i. e.* Ráma the strong, in consequence of the prowess he had displayed in vanquishing the demon Pralamba ; Dángoli, where Krishna dropt his ‘staff,’ (*dáng*) and the fair lake of Mán-sarovar, scene of a passing lovers’ ‘quarrel’ (*mán*). Then follow the villages, of Piparoli, with its broad-spreading pípal trees ; Loh-ban, perpetuating the defeat of the demon Lohásur ; Gopálpúr, favourite station of the herdsmen ; and Rával, where Radha was born and passed the first years of infancy before her parents went to live at Barsána. Next comes Burhiya ká kherá, home of the old dame whose son had taken in marriage Rádhá’s friend Mánvati. The fickle Krishna saw and loved, and in order to gratify his passion undisturbed, assumed the husband’s form. The unsuspecting bride received him fondly to her arms, while the good mother was enjoined to keep close watch below, and if any one came to the door pretending to be her son, by no means to open to him but rather, if he persisted, pelt him with brick-bats till he ran away. So the honest man lost his wife, and got his head broken into the bargain. After leaving the scene of this merry jest, the pilgrims pass on to Bandigánw, name commemorative of Jasoda’s two faithful domestics, Bandi and Anandi, and arrive at Baldeva, with its wealthy temple dedicated in honour of that divinity and his spouse Revati. Then beyond the village of Hathora are the two river fords, Chintaharan, ‘the dispeller of doubt,’ and Brahmanda, ‘creation’ Ghát. Here the child Krishna’s playmates came running to tell Jasoda that he had been stuffing his mouth with clay ; but when she took up a stick to punish him, he opened his mouth to prove the story false, and shewed her there the whole terrestrial globe, with all its seas and continents distinct, within the compass of his baby cheeks. Close by is the town of Mahában, famous for many incidents in Krishna’s infancy, where he was rocked in the cradle, and received his name from the great pandit Garg, and where he did to death Pútana and the other evil spirits whom Kausa had commissioned to destroy him. At Gokul on the river bank are innumerable shrines and temples dedicated to the god under some one or other of his favourite titles, as Bitthalnáth, Madan Mohan, Mádhav Ráe, Kalyán Ráe, Gokulnáth, Nava-níl-priya and Diváráká-náth, and when all have been

duly honoured with a visit, the weary pilgrims finally recross the stream, and sit down to rest at the point from which they started, the Visránt Ghát, the holiest place in the holy city of Mathurá.

As shewn in the above narrative, many of the incidents to which the attention of the pilgrims is directed in the course of the perambulation refer to Krishna's amours with Rádhá, and accordingly have no place in the original Pauránik legends, where Rádhá is barely mentioned even by name. It would seem that the earliest literary authority for these popular interpolations is no Sanskrit work whatever, but a Hindi poem, entitled the Braj Bilás, written by one Brajbási Dás, so recently as the middle of last century.* He represents his work as derived from the Puránas, which except in the main outlines it certainly is not; and as he mentions no other source of information, it may be presumed that he had none beyond his own invention and some floating local traditions which he was the first to reduce into a connected series. A striking illustration of the essentially modern character of orthodox Hinduism, despite its persistent claim to rigid inflexibility and immemorial prescription.

* The precise date, Sambat 1800, or 1743 A. D., is given in the following line—'Sambat subh purán sat jáno;' सम्बत शुभ पुराण शत जातो.

